A bison walked down the pathway just as its ancestors had done for thousands of years. Other animals, both large and small also used this trail. The animals' feet and hooves packed the dirt tightly so it was hard for plants to grow there. Many animals nibbled on branches along the trail, keeping it clear.

Bison, elk, and deer were large animals that lived in the area that we now call Mississippi. Animals found it easier to walk on paths already opened through the woods. We call those paths; game trails. Many game trails crossed each other through the thick forests that covered Mississippi, Alabama and Tennessee. The game trails took shape because large animals walked there, each animal following the footsteps of another. Sometimes animals stayed close together because there is safety in numbers. Sometimes the trails were also used by hungry predators that were looking for prey. Large predators like wolves, bears and mountain lions also used the trails. They could move faster on the slightly opened paths. No human feet touched the trails for thousands of years.

His moccasins wet from the morning dew, a young man hid behind a tree near the game trail. He sat quietly holding his handmade bow and arrow. His family counted on his hunting skills so they could eat. If he was quiet, he may see a fat deer walking down the trail. It would provide food for his family for weeks.

About 12,000 years ago, a new hunter showed up on the scene. These hunters were the prehistoric people we call American Indians. They followed the same paths as the animals. It was easier to follow the animal path than to cut a new path through the thick forest. Sometimes they could find animals using the path. This is where they could hunt animals for meat to eat. They traveled the old animal trails for many other reasons, too. They would use them for war parties, trade routes or maybe to visit their friends. One of the main trails was sometimes called the Path of Peace. Many trails joined each other. One trail started to take shape from the southern part of Mississippi northward toward Tennessee. Most of the people who used the trails were from tribes named Choctaw, Natchez and Chickasaw. Parts of the well traveled trail were called by many names like the Path to the Choctaw Nation, the Choctaw-Chickasaw Trail, and the Chickasaw Trace.

A young wife hung her laundry on the rope to dry. In her pocket was a letter she had written days ago. She hoped today would be the day the postal rider came by. Her family lived far to the north in Tennessee. She had not heard from them in a month. She hoped for some good news.

More time passed and more people from other areas of the world came to the area called Mississippi Territory. These people were from Europe and searched for resources that would improve their lives. They used the path the American Indians used because it was easier than cutting new paths through the thick forest. Most of the large animals were hunted heavily so there were no more in the Mississippi territory area but the people kept using the old trails. The trails that were used the most, got wider and packed down harder.

More and more people settled in the south east. In 1800 the government decided that the people needed a road for the mail. That road was then called the <u>Postal Road or the Federal Road</u>. Its official name was the <u>Road from Nashville in the State of Tennessee to the Grindstone Ford of the Bayou Pierre in the Mississippi Territory.</u>

In 1801, the US government started making treaties with the Indians so they could tie together several of the well used American Indian trails.

The boatman counted his money in a quiet corner of the inn. In front of him was almost all the money he would make in a whole year. He had hauled furs and flour down the Ohio River to the Mississippi River and stopped at capital city of Natchez. There he sold everything including his boat. He would spend very little money as he walked five hundred miles home along the Natchez Road. He would try to live off the land.

When the European people settled in towns, they often walked or rode horses from one town to the next. Many times the towns were a long way away. It was easier and faster if they could use rivers to travel but rivers only flow in one direction. Many people from more northern areas like Tennessee and Kentucky floated down rivers on rafts and flat boats to a large, growing town in southern Mississippi called Natchez. They carried goods to sell. It was too hard to paddle back up the river so they walked hundreds of miles on that old trail that was first used by animals and then by the American Indians. They called this road the Natchez Road.

The man camped in a hollow not far from the sunken trail. He had already stolen two hundred dollars from a sleeping boatman. Maybe tonight, he could double that amount. He hoped he would not have to kill his victim.

While boatman walked on the road northward toward home, a new kind of predator showed up on the trail: robbers. Everyone knew that many people traveling north on the trail had a lot of money. People who were too lazy to work stole it from the hard working travelers. Sometimes the road was rough to walk and a dangerous place to travel, so it was nicknamed, <u>The Devil's Backbone</u>.

The soldier was lucky. He had a horse. Most soldiers following General Jackson were on foot. They were all looking forward to being home. The battle had been hard and long. Now ahead of them lay 500 miles of forests and farms.

During war times, the road was known as the <u>Military Road</u>. It was used by Andrew Jackson during the war of 1812. Not long after that, steamboats were used more and more to carry people on the river because they could move easily both up

and down the river. After that, The Natchez Road was still used but not as much. It was often called the Trace Road.

A loud wale from a steamboat whistle shattered the air. The boat headed north on the river. Boatmen and traders to risk life and limb walking the 500 miles back home. Now they could go home in style on a steamboat.

Many other roads were built over parts of the Natchez Road. Even though many people had forgotten about the importance of the Natchez Road, in 1905 a group of women, The Mississippi Daughters of the American Revolution read an article in a magazine about "The Natchez Trace" and got the idea to place markers along the route of the old Natchez Trace Road. Eventually people in Mississippi convinced the government to build a National Parkway so everyone would always remember how important the Natchez Trace was to the forming of this part of the United States of America. On May 18, 1938, President Franklin Roosevelt signed the official statement that began the forming the Natchez Trace Parkway which is part of the National Park Service.

The kids jumped out of the car and ran to the trail. It was Marty's birthday and the party was an adventure hiking on an ancient trail. Everyone was going to use their imaginations and make up a story about what it would have been like to walk on the trail two-hundred years ago for thirty days.

Today people can enjoy nature and history as they drive along the Natchez Trace Parkway in a car. However, there is real adventure in getting out of the car and exploring the exact trails where American Indians, boatmen and pioneers lived and died. The Natchez Trace National Scenic Trail preserves these paths for people to experience the surroundings, the same sights, smells and sounds that were there hundreds of years ago.